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The Match

MAXINE KUMIN

At first he mistook her for a lost child. Watching the tassel of her knitted cap bob up over the granite ledges as she made her way toward him he gradually revised his image. Even as he was being discovered he could see this was a young woman, slightly built, moving awkwardly across the uneven terrain. Unused, he thought contemptuously, to woods walking. As she came up to him, a little out of breath from the climb, he saw she was no longer young although her face had weathered well with smile crinkles at the corners of her generous mouth. It was the snub nose that helped him mistake her for a child.

His one outing of the season when only antlered deer could be taken, he was none too pleased to be walked up to. From where he crouched on his stand he had an almost unbroken view across the glade and partway down the ledges. A providential dusting of fresh snow had fallen overnight powdering the rocks and pine duff. His own footsteps now barely showed; he had been careful to skirt the clearing and climb to his stand as economically as possible. Now he was ready, as ready as any cougar might have been fifty, a hundred years ago, for the big cats knew how to wait to pounce.

The tree stand was traditionally, not technically, his. The property belonged to an out-of-state flatlander named Walter Chester who had bought up huge tracts during the recession and was still holding them, doubtless waiting for the market to improve. By now he had probably forgotten he owned this east-facing slope of Grimes Peak.

The small person had reached the foot of the tree and called up to him. "Why are you doing this?"

"What are you doing out here? Who are you?"

"I live down there." She gestured behind her. "I'm trying to find out why you're doing this, what the purpose of it is."

"Jesus!" He replaced his rifle in the sling and clambered down from the platform. "The purpose is to take a deer, lady. It's hunting season, didn't you know that? Here's my license."

"Of course I know that. I mean, why are you hunting? Why do you want to kill a deer?"

He was baffled but only for a minute. "What are you, one of those animal rights nuts? Don't you know the deer would starve if we didn't thin the herd every fall? Or you, you bleeding heart, would you rather see them starve to death?"

"There's no real scientific evidence for that, you know. It's just a line the gun lobby puts out for propaganda. If the deer weren't hunted to death they wouldn't reproduce so heavily and the population would level off."

"Lady, that's just about the dumbest crock of...oh hell. I'm not gonna stand here arguing with you. Just turn around and go back the way you came. You've already ruined the morning for me and prob'ly the afternoon, too."

"Do you do it for food? Do you like to eat deer?"

He didn't especially like venison steak. Ground up it made a passable hamburg and doctored, an even better sausage. But he wasn't crazy about the taste of it straight. He gave most of it away.

"It's none of your damn business if I eat it or stuff it. Now get outta here before you get shot at."

She was persistent. "Does Mr. Chester know you're here?"

"This land's not posted. Chester knows better than to post his land. And besides, he probably doesn't even know where his property lines are."

"What does that mean, 'he knows better'?"

"Lotta things happen on posted land. Soreheads'll chop down trees, shoot up signs. One time a bunch of guys sank a rowboat just by plugging it with shells over on Nonesuch Pond. Absentee landowner puts up all those No Hunting signs, he's just asking for trouble."

"It just so happens Walter Chester is a friend of my family's. He'll be interested to hear this. I'm renting the caretaker cottage from him."

"Wonderful." Wes picked up his 30.30 and began sighting along it.

He was determined not to say another word. Sure enough, she turned around and started back toward the ledges. Even in the presence of a raised rifle she walked like a proud cat, never hurrying.

Wes had hunted this area ever since he was old enough to carry a gun. At first he went out with his father, a man not in the habit of saying much, and he watched and crouched beside him and tried not to hiccup or scratch himself. His father brought down a deer every year but one and that one was a hard winter with deep snows. The deer all yarded up in cut-over lots lower down the mountain and it was more like shooting fish in a barrel than a man stalking deer with his rifle and his wiles. He didn't even buy a license that year.

Well, the old man was seven years dead. Wes's sister had left Liston five years ago to marry the music and arts teacher in the next town. There were no other siblings. Wes had an ever-changing population of strays, lost or abandoned dogs he had taken in, black and tan, spotted and splotched damaged dogs that were his family. Everybody in Liston knew he was a sucker for dogs. Also cats, but he was not passionate about cats. They didn't meet you halfway.

Like most people in his part of the country, he was respectful of bears. He believed every bear story he heard. He honored coyotes too, for their quick wits. Maybe they brought down a lamb or two, but mostly they preyed on mice and moles. They ate berries, fish. Once he'd watched a coyote casually stalking grasshoppers and catching them in his mouth in mid-jump. Porcupines were vermin in his book, along with woodchucks; skunk didn't rate much higher. You could club a porcupine, just step on his tail and clonk him with a two by four. Wes had pulled enough quills out of enough dogs to whet his appetite for finishing off any porcupines he came across.

If questioned, he would have said he loved deer, loved their secretive presence, the sense of a whole herd of them fanning out, even as he hunted. Loved finding the flattened wallows where they had bedded down. In tall grasses you could spy out a group, four or five all travelling together, lying down together. Lots of times in late summer he'd put up a doe and her fawn, faced them across a clearing, the fawn's tawny spots making it almost invisible in the dappled sunlight. It was something to see.

The day was ruined, he was sure of it. That woman's footprints were visible little ovals laid out like a lure bisecting the glade he had been at such pains not to sully. Her odor was in them and worse, the scent of her perfume, her hair spray, whatever foreign smells she carried. These would linger for hours. He felt violated by the encounter, unnerved to have his rights questioned, his compact with the land cast in doubt.

He knew those crazies were out there, he had read about them picketing experimental labs—and here he had felt a warm onrush of sympathy thinking of dogs held prisoner in metal cages, tortured and then sacrificed for the advancement of medical science. He had read with an almost gluttonous fury about rabbits having their eyelids sewn open to permit technicians to test for allergic reactions to drugs and even to various cosmetics.

But he had never connected these protests to deer season. Or bird season, for that matter. Though he didn't care for duck, from time to

time he hunted grouse and bagged his limit. They made a good small meal, legal and plentiful in October. Kinder, he thought, than supermarket chicken which he privately called concentration-camp chicken, knowing the conditions under which they were raised. Why are you doing this? he kept mimicking her lilting treble calling up to him. Cute little open-faced thing, she'd gotten to him. Yea, Wes, why the fuck?

As it turned out, he got an eight-point buck late that afternoon, not more than thirty minutes before sunset. Wes was honorable about hunting hours and leery, too, of being caught in the woods at twilight. Eighty percent of all hunting accidents happen just at sunrise or when the light is fading; he remembered reading that. It was fully dark by the time he got the buck field-dressed and dragged it, leaving a trail of red on the snow, out to his pickup. Grunting from the effort, he loaded it into the back; he'd take it to Deveraux's Hardware, the official inspection station, in the morning.

He would have to admit he delayed getting into town till midmorning in hopes there'd be people around to admire his take, and he was right. It was a bright crisp day for getting errands done; half the town crowded up to the scales where his buck broke 180 lbs., not quite a record. Dev measured, inspected, then tagged it as it hung swaying a little in death, its glazed eyes open. Several little boys daringly poked and stroked its hide. The wispy woman from the woods, coming out of the store with a package under her arm, locked eyes with him as he glanced around. He looked away first.

Since it was the first Saturday of the month, he stuck around for the EMT drill, which was held at noon in the firehouse, preceded by pizzas and followed by beer and horseshoe pitching, if the weather allowed. Wes had been a member of the emergency medical team and the volunteer fire department ever since he came of age twenty years ago. Joining up was part of turning 21 in Liston; he had never questioned it. It said you were a responsible citizen; if not a family man, at least not a hell-raiser.

He was married, briefly, that same year of his majority. In Liston, New Hampshire you pretty much married your high school sweetheart. His, Mary Ellen Dowd, had gone to college out of state, which was in itself unusual. Wes had signed on at the telephone company with his dad right after high school. Most of his work was laying out new lines, which suited him. He guessed he knew every back road in Liston County by heart. He knew where the wild day lilies flowered and which pond's spring peepers gave earliest voice. Often he could take his latest

rescued dogs with him. Desk work was a disaster he chose to avoid whenever possible but Mary Ellen thought he ought to take an administrative job and try to get ahead.

She didn't care for the way he hung out with his rowdy buddies late at the firehouse or went off to the tavern on the highway with them for a few beers. Wives traditionally raised these objections and husbands goodhumoredly placated them with white lies and excuses, but in Wes and Mary Ellen's case, things escalated into pitched battles.

Wes wasn't a fighter by nature. He was a low-key guy, kept his own counsel. He treated women carefully, pretty much watched his language around them, never raised his hand to one. Not like men he knew who just lost it when they drank. Beat up their women, then played this game of a thousand sorries after. Flowers and all that, courting them all over again.

They actually got along a lot better after the divorce. Mary Ellen met an aspiring lawyer down in Concord and eventually they married and started a family. She and Wes still exchanged Christmas cards and every once in a while he'd run into her when she came back to Liston to visit her folks.

Bachelorhood suited him. But he wasn't a recluse. He bought a precut log cabin and assembled it over the summer months on a five-acre lot that bordered the federal wetlands. His nearest neighbor was a mile in any direction. Every June he threw a big bash for summer solstice with kegs of beer and loudspeakers blasting rock music well into the night. And every Sunday after Thanksgiving he spread a buffet with venison meatballs and red wine. Everybody came.

The women really let down their hair at Wes's parties. People paired off in the goddamnedest combinations; he was always a little obscurely ashamed the next day reviewing these events. He wasn't in the habit of sleeping around though it sometimes happened. He didn't really want a steady woman, a fact that was generally known in town. Mostly he stayed home and talked to his dogs and watched cable TV, which came in at a discount rate on the telephone lines.

Right into December Wes was out on the Grimes Peak Road overseeing the installation of nine new poles. The Liston phone company was converting some of its old lines that zigzagged through woods on right-of-ways to less maintenance-dependent lines along the roads. The men were hurrying to get poles into the ground before a hard freeze closed them down for the winter.

Going in and out the one-lane road twice or even three times a day Wes couldn't avoid meeting his little woods walker. He had since

learned her name was Julia and she was a “fiber artist.” “What the hell is a fiber artist?” he had asked Perry Enders, his informant.

“You know. She does things with wool,” leaving him with a vague image out of his grade school history book of a woman carding and spinning fleece.

And then he saw an exhibit of her work at the Liston Christmas Fair: felted mittens and berets tarted up with embroidery, some loose-woven throws with knotted fringes, and something that looked like a rug but was meant to hang on a wall, with interlocking animals woven into it. “A tapestry,” he was told. The price tag was \$1200, which guaranteed that he wasn’t going to buy it. He went back a couple of times just to look at it, to study the stylized animals that seemed to be dancing in tandem around the edges. They were a puzzling procession: what looked like an oversized mouse was linked to a cat, in turn hanging onto a dog that seemed to be chasing a pig. At the front of the little parade, a child. The pattern repeated all the way around. He marvelled at the intricate design, the way the colors shaded into one another. He could see she really was an artist.

The morning of December 10 when her car overtook him on the Grimes Peak Road he wasn’t sure how to act, so he nodded and lifted one hand in terse acknowledgment. By the time she came back from town, though, the backhoe was planted across the road and she had to stop. It was obvious to both of them that a brief chat was in order. She initiated it.

“Well, I see you got your deer after all.”

“Yup.”

“Is it good?”

“Don’t know. I sent it over to the Chesley Home.”

“What’s that?”

“State home for folks that can’t live on their own anymore.”

“So what are you eating?”

“Oh, lots of things. I got some brook trout still in the freezer from last spring.” But then the backhoe finished maneuvering. She bumped the Nova out of neutral and into drive and was gone.

“Hope she isn’t planning to drive that hunk of junk all winter,” he said to no one in particular.

She was gone over Christmas and most of January. He knew this in the way that small-town news travels. Jimbo Flood, Liston’s one plumber, had been called to come out and drain the pipes. He would go back and restart the system on the 20th. He’d had to build a helluva roaring fire just to warm the place up before he dared prime the pump.

Wes didn't have any official reason to run out the Grimes Peak Road but toward the end of January he told himself it might be good to see how the poles were setting up now that there was two feet of snow on the ground. He had heard the sound of wheels futilely spinning, wearing away rubber, before he even got to where the road bends and begins to climb. Her Nova was wedged sideways on a slick patch. There was a sand barrel a little further on; he had a shovel in the truck so it didn't take long to free her.

"You'd best get some grain bags full of sand or even a couple of concrete blocks to carry in the trunk of this thing. Road's gonna get lots trickier than this."

"Thanks. Hey, I wanted to say I'm sorry about...that day up there." She gestured behind herself in the direction of the ledges. "This isn't an apology or anything, I still don't believe in hunting, but I'm sorry I spoiled your day."

"S'okay. Now it's none of my business but if you're thinking about staying all winter you oughta get rid of that Nova and pick yourself out something more suitable. Something with a stick shift and four-wheel drive. Automatics are no damned good on these hills."

"I might stay." She turned a smile on him so vulnerable and radiant that he felt heat rush to his face. She held out her hand. "Julia Mather. Soon to be Julia Hesselstrom again."

"Wesley Kingsley. Never been anything else." He smiled back. They shook gloved hands and exhaled little ghost puffs.

"I might stay," she repeated. "I have a little money. My kids are grown and gone. One's in law school, the other's a painter, she's in California." He was frankly stunned. "You don't look old enough to have grown kids."

She made a little face that said she had heard that before. "You?"

"Oh, I'm just a fixture. Born and raised here, work for the telephone company. Had a wife once, long time ago."

They didn't exactly run out of things to say. It was as if, Wes thought afterward, they had both arrived at a crossroad, a four-way stop, and neither was certain who should go first. He thought she could have invited him back for a cup of coffee or to see her work. He thought she thought he might refuse or he might make a pass at her or godknaws. He thought he should have mentioned the tapestry, he could have asked her to explain it. He found he couldn't imagine her life, he didn't have enough to go on.

Ten days later his beeper went off just as he was sitting down to his supper. He stashed his plate on top of the fridge where the dogs

couldn't get it, shut the cats into the back hall, jammed his feet into his boots, and took off, licensed dome light twirling, for the fire station.

"Fire at the old Chester place," Perry told him.

"How bad?"

"Can't tell. Pumper's already out and so's the ladder truck."

"It'll be a bitch if we have to pump in this weather." He wondered who had turned in the alarm. She must be out there; nobody else would have seen a fire till the place burned down to the ground.

"You better believe. Guess we'll go in your truck," Perry said. "Mine's skippen again."

"Points?"

"Prob'ly."

By the time they got there they were superfluous.

"Chimney fire!" Perry spat his quid out the truck window, half in disgust, half in relief.

Ray Jenkins and Charlie Santos had hauled the steaming woodstove out of the cottage. It sat on the satiny snow crust like a surprised black bear.

Inside, the stovepipe dangled from the chimney flue, its elbow bent at an improbable angle. Windows had been opened to dissipate the smoke. It was almost as cold in as out of doors. Julia Mather stood in the middle of a group of volunteers. She looked pale and a little scared; they always did, after the crisis was over. He hoped she wasn't going to faint.

Apparently she had let the stove go out during the warm afternoon, then attempted to start a fire when she got back from her errands. Cold stoves are stubborn starters. When the fire didn't catch promptly she added several wads of newspaper imperfectly crumpled. These ignited all at once, lodged in the pipe cutting off air flow, and a severe downdraft sucked the rest of the papers into a fiery mass. Clouds of smoke billowed back into the room, a familiar scenario. At that point she panicked and dialed 3434.

"...dizzy," he heard her say.

"Get a blanket, somebody," he said, shouldering his way into the group. "Charlie, see if you can heat up some water, she needs some hot tea or something."

It was an electric stove. While they waited for the teakettle to hiss, Wes opened several cupboards in search of a tea bag.

"What's this stuff?" He dangled a square packet with foreign symbols on it.

"Miso," she said. She was now sitting at the table wrapped in a rose-colored comforter and she was still shaking.

"Whaddya do with it?"

"Drink it. It's like soup."

"Smells like a goddam Chinese restaurant. You got some coffee somewhere?"

"No."

"Tea?"

"Any whiskey?" Ray asked.

"Whiskey's the worst thing in the world for shock," Wes told him.

"There's some camomile tea over there, on the left." She gestured above the stove.

"Jesus, not that sissy stuff," Ray muttered to Perry.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I don't keep any stimulants around."

Wes didn't like the looks of her lips. They were still a pinched lavender. Little spasms of shivers were coursing through her body, making her teeth chatter. There was something appealing about her, even desirable. He wondered about the stimulants remark. Was she a former alcoholic? He stirred the miso and handed her the mug.

Within an hour the squad had cleaned creosote out of her stovepipe and chimney flue. Wes himself clambered up on the roof and shone his company flashlight down to check for any obstructions. Charlie and Ray carried the stove back in, with rather more grunts than were required. They reattached the pipe, levelled the stove, relaid a fire and got a good blaze going. They instructed her in the care and feeding of woodstoves in general, airtight cast-iron ones in particular.

"You guys go ahead," Wes said. "I'm gonna stay a while and put up a good pile of kindling so we don't have to come back out here again."

They shuffled around a bit as they were leaving. Perry gave Wes a broad wink. "Don't wear out that little hatchet."

Since there was nothing else, he fixed Julia a second cup of miso; himself, camomile. "Where's your milk? You run out?"

"I don't use milk. I'm a vegan."

"What's that?"

"Someone who only eats plants."

"You mean like a vegetarian? They eat milk and eggs and things."

"Ovo-lactarian vegetarians do. Vegans don't."

"Judas Priest. No wonder you're such a slip of a thing. Whaddya live on?"

"Fruits, vegetables, nuts, whole grains. Lots of soybean products."

"You mean like tofu?"

"Tofu is one item. There's also soy cheese, even soy ice cream."

He grimaced.

"Want some peanut butter cookies to go with the tea?"

"Criminy, you mean you eat cookies?"

"Well, I don't have two heads, Wesley. I was stupid about the stove, I don't eat meat or dairy products, but I do have a life."

"Yea-zoo, I didn't mean you didn't, I just..."

"Well, you act like you think I live in a cocoon somewhere. I've been around, I've been arrested five times, I've gone to jail."

"Arrested? What for?"

"Criminal trespass. Theft. Destruction of government property. Disorderly conduct. Resisting an officer." She ticked them off on her fingers.

"Come on, Julia, don't bullshit me. Theft of what?"

"Theft of cats, for one. We broke into a lab at Preston University and stole six cats they'd been injecting with various paralyzing agents, cats that were going to be "harvested"—that's the euphemism they use for killing them."

"Oh, that's it. Animal rights, I remember reading something about it in the paper. Oh yeah, it fits."

"You think I'm crazy."

"I think you're crazy but I respect it, you know? I gotta respect you for living what you believe. You steal anything else?"

"Mink. Primates. Dogs, most of them family pets that were picked up on the streets and sold to biomedical labs."

"Jesus H Christ." Wes was amazed. She looked like a perfectly ordinary person, definitely not the warrior type.

"You have any pets?"

"Dogs. Five of them right now. Summer people drop them off in my driveway when they're sick a them. Some go to the pound, some I keep. I try to keep the puppies, give them a good start."

She winced.

"See, people don't have respect for animals, they treat them like a Nintendo game or something. See, if you needed to take out a license to have a dog or a cat, there wouldn't be so much...abandonment."

"Five dogs. I never would have guessed it."

"Couple a cats too." He said it modestly, aware he had just won a hundred brownie points.

"Be careful. Next thing you know, you'll be joining our group."

"What's it called?"

"AA. *Animals All*. Our slogan is: A rat is a cat is a dog is a pig is a boy."

"I get it. Is that what you put in the border around your tapestry?"

She looked pleased. "You saw that?"

"Saw the whole exhibit. You're the first artist I ever knew close up."

"Thank you for telling me."

He closed his hand over hers, felt her stubby, tough fingers. She did not pull back.

He stopped by the next day with a pickup truckload of split hardwood from his own pile.

"You shouldn't have done that."

"You've only got a cord, cord and a half out there. It can get a whole lot colder than this here. You better believe."

"I've got backup electric heat. I don't like to use it much, it's so expensive."

"Well, this'll hold you for a bit." He hesitated. "You gonna ask me in?"

"Certainly."

He ended up staying for lunch, which was surprisingly normal. Vegetable soup, homemade bread, apples and cookies.

"I don't s'pose you'd come over for supper one night? Meet my dogs?"

"I'd love to," she said, never missing a beat. She bestowed that smile on him and this time he felt the flush begin in his groin.

"Another thing. You can call me Wes."

"My friends call me Jules. My fellow thieves call me J.J."

"You're lucky to have two names. I'm just plain Wes to friend and foe."

It snowed steadily Thursday, the day she was to come over. He didn't trust the Nova so he went to fetch her himself. Driving back, he tried to explain about the snow, how it lifted everyone's spirits, how it was good for the pastures—"poor man's fertilizer, they call it"—good for insulating the ground, wells, houses. Good for horses' and cows' hooves, for the skiers, for replenishing the reservoirs.

"Why, that's practically a prayer, Wes," she said, embarrassing him.

He knew she was an animal nut but he wasn't prepared for the reception his dogs gave her. It was downright eerie the way they howled and fussed and rolled over on their backs to have their bellies scratched.

He had given the meal much thought, not wanting to contravene her code. He fixed a pasta sauce laced with plenty of garlic and mushrooms and he put a dish of Parmesan cheese on the table, which he sprinkled liberally over his portion. She passed it by. He'd bought an apple pie from Ella's, an authentic local bakery. He topped his with vanilla ice cream. She had peppermint tea while he doused his coffee

with cream. The dogs lolled under the table. Not one growled or snapped at another. The cats sat on top of the refrigerator, the Maine coon cat with the torn ear kept his yellow eyes fixed on Julia while his bushy tail hung down, forming a plume.

"So you don't drink coffee or tea or beer or wine?"

"I'm a recovering alcoholic."

"That's what I guessed. Well, you came to the right place. So's half this town."

"I went off the deep end a few years back, after the really bad arrest. I couldn't sleep so I started pouring myself nightcaps and then I found I couldn't stop."

"What bad arrest?"

"Oh, this was in Michigan the night we broke into the university."

"You broke in?"

"You always try to commit your sabotage at night. We destroyed their files on mink research, they claimed it was thirty years' worth."

"You just ripped up the papers?"

She laughed. "No, better than that. We set them on fire. But three of us were caught and the cops were really brutal."

"You take the cake," Wes said. He couldn't picture her in that environment.

"I don't like to talk about it. They hogtied me, if you know what that is."

He nodded.

"And two of them beat me up on the way to jail, ruptured my spleen."

"Jesus. These were men beating on you?"

"State troopers. Good old boys."

Wes made some commiserating sounds.

"The thing is, they'd been staking out the lab for weeks, waiting for something to happen."

"But what I don't get is, why do you want to put yourself on the line like that? When you know people are gonna jump you for it?"

"Wes, I've cared about these things all my life. I care that people still club baby seals for their fur. That fishermen cut the fins off shark for Chinese restaurants and then toss them back in the ocean to die. I've been there, it's so ugly. Even rats. I'm not fond of rats, but if you've ever seen them trained with electric shocks to run a maze..."

"So now you're out of jail and on your own?"

"Well, first I had a sort of breakdown. Too much pressure from all sides. I pretty much got out of the movement..."

"The animal rights movement?"

"The activist, confrontational part. Then I joined the other AA—" "Alcoholics?"

"Right. I went to meetings every week for about a year. And now I just try to stay clean."

She got up then and started clearing the table.

"I'll wash," Wes said. "You can dry if you want."

"Delighted."

The last cup was in her hand when he came up behind her, lifted the hair on her neck and asked, "Would you get mad if I kissed you?"

She turned to face him. "Where is this going?"

"It isn't going anywhere you don't want it to go."

"Wes. It's been four years since I've kissed a man."

"Well, let's not wait any longer then, okay?"

She opened her arms and took him in.

Fitted against him he smelled her hair, unperfumed but faintly minty. Her mouth opened under his as she kissed him back. He ran his hands down her sides and cupped her to him as he grew hard. But the dogs went wild, scrabbling to get between them.

"You see who they prefer," Julia said. "Now I'm an interloper."

"Don't be too sure. I could be the one they want to drive off."

After some order had been restored Wes suggested they retreat upstairs.

"It's cozy up here under the eaves," she said in his monastic bedroom. "Toasty warm."

"Warm air rises," he said, and facing each other they began to undress like two teenagers at a strip poker game. At that moment his beeper went off.

"Shit!" He rebuttoned his shirt.

She pulled her sweater back over her head. "I've gotta go, I can't not go, you know?"

"I know."

Her tone was so level that he couldn't tell how she meant it. Was she disappointed or relieved?

"You stay here, Jules. Maybe it won't take long. We get a lot of emergency calls that don't amount to anything this time of year." He swiped his lips across hers, then leapt down the stairs.

Jimbo Flood's parents' dairy barn had burned down. Out of thirty head of cattle they'd only been able to save sixteen. It was the worst disaster in Liston since the 1962 hurricane. There'd been a rash of

electrical fires then as the winds brought down power lines, poles, transformers, or so the oldtimers said. This fire was electrical, too; a defective cooler had shorted out.

Wes could still smell the charred timbers, hear the live cows moaning for the others as they milled around directionless. His ribs were bruised from the jostling he took as he and Charlie raced into the barn hooting and shoving, shooing cow after cow into the open. He didn't feel the kicks so much, it was their sheer weight pressing on him. The cows' lowing in terror like the rising of a terrible wind was a sound he hoped never to hear again.

He and the others struggled to round them up, driving them through stinging sleet into the open pasture where all they could do was huddle like football players. It was pitiful. Even though there was a stand of pines at one end of the pasture, the Floods would probably lose some more before they could arrange to get the survivors trucked to neighboring farms.

It was well after midnight when he returned bruised and bone-weary and caked with soot and mud. She had left the outside light on. The dogs, accustomed to the sound of his truck, whined a little but didn't bark.

He tiptoed upstairs. Jules was asleep in his bed, in his flannel pajamas. He took a long hot shower, rooted around in his bureau for another pair, and slipped in beside her.

She woke long enough to identify him. "Wes?"

"Shh. It's 2 a.m. I'll tell you in the morning." He curled around her and spoon-fashion they slept.

When he woke, her side of the bed was empty but the imprint of her body was still there. He could hear her downstairs talking softly to the dogs. The storm had cleared. A brisk wind now whipped up great froths of snow and swirled them into the trees so that it looked like a fresh snowfall was under way. March had come in like a lion, all right.

"There you are. I made you some coffee."

He took the cup with a little salute, then sat down facing her to tell about the fire.

"God. Those poor people! And the cows, cows are so afraid of fire."

"All animals are. Don't know how many'll pull through." He was secretly pleased that her first response was sympathy for the humans.

"You must be beat. And hungry. Maybe we can have some oatmeal?"

"Listen to me, Jules. That's the first time I've spent a whole night with a woman in umpteen years."

"Really? How'd you like it?"

"Don't know. I fell asleep so fast I didn't have a chance to . . . appreciate it. I'd like to try again."

"Before breakfast?"

"Before breakfast."

"You'll be late for work."

"I'll call in sick."

As they started up the stairs together she said, "Where's your beeper?"

"In the truck. I'm not taking any more chances."

Word got out around Liston that Wes was keeping company with the lady who almost burned the Chester place down. Although he suffered the ribbing goodnaturedly, he didn't volunteer any information about Julia. What they did or said, where they went or spent the night was their own affair. Mostly she stayed over in the cabin. Five dogs were like having children all over again, she said. Days, he went to work and she to her studio in the caretaker's cottage. Her work was going well. She said she had started a new tapestry, this time with cows in it. The Floods sold off the survivors. They were putting the farm up for sale and moving to Florida.

"With the rest of the snowbirds," Wes said, disapproving. Julia said how sad it was to see good people leaving the land. Although she didn't approve of keeping dairy cows.

"Well, what about raising sheep? What about the ram lambs, you can't use but one or two for breeding. If you don't sell them for meat you've got to castrate them. What about that?"

"I know. But shearing their wool once a year feels different to me from keeping cows, breeding them for calves in order to rob the milk. And those little vealers raised in slatted cages in the dark, not even able to turn around, that has to be the cruelest practice."

"I agree with you there. Round here, though, people raise them on grass, mostly they don't pen them up."

"So it's a short happy life. But what right do we have to do it?"

Silence was Wes's first reflex. He rooted around warily for something to say. "Thing is, I wish you didn't care so much."

"I know. I went overboard once. I'm learning not to obsess."

"How do you do that?"

"I use up some of it in my weaving."

"And the rest?"

"I do this with it." She pounced on him, tickling him in the armpits until, howling *I give up!* he caught her in a bear hug.

With something close to sorrow he saw that he had fallen in love

with her. To him she was a small mysterious goddess whose values often struck him as bizarre. He saw he was ready to spend the rest of his life unravelling the mystery. Fitted together like spoons they would drop wordlessly into sleep. One night he would awaken inside her dream and then he would know the world that she knew.

Little by little Wes gathered that there had been a major nervous collapse. Not one big dramatic moment the way it happens on TV and you see the person led away drooping between two starched attendants. Jules's had been a sort of gradual decline. Of not wanting to get up in the morning and then not wanting to eat and on top of that, more vodka downed earlier and earlier until evening had backed up into afternoon. She told him that her marriage had begun to come apart well before her breakdown. Her causes sat down with them at breakfast, crawled into bed with them at night, breathing between them in the kingsize bed.

He understood that she was trying to warn him; "I don't scare easy," he told her.

In mid-April he rototilled a space for her garden and watched as she plotted what to plant where. Because the garden was so close to the cottage he didn't suggest fencing it. He didn't count on the lawless ways of several generations of rabbits and woodchucks that had laid uninterrupted claim to that space. All the lettuce went down in one night and about half the peas were nipped off at ground level.

Shooting was out of the question. Gas bombs in the chuck holes were vetoed, too. His Jules was a vegan without a garden. But the Swiss chard pulled through and, cunningly wrapped in hardware cloth, several broccoli seedlings thrived.

He didn't taunt her with questions about how the vegetables she bought at the grocery store were raised. Those acres and acres of soybean fields must have harbored thousands of rabbit nests. Farmers learn how to be ruthless. Did she make the connection on her own?

Blackflies, that terrible scourge of the north country, came on schedule. It was mid-May.

"They'll go as soon as the mosquitoes get here." Wes bought her an Adirondacks hat to wear out of doors, a skullcap with netting that hung down long enough to be tucked in a shirt.

"God. I never thought I'd pray for mosquitoes." She pulled out a packet of seeds and studied the instructions on the back.

"Jules, it's too early for squash."

"Too early? It's got to be eighty degrees today."

"And tomorrow it could frost. You've got to wait till the oak leaves are the size of a mouse's ear."

She looked up at the bare branches. "A mouse's ear? What kind of scientific measurement is that?"

She wouldn't come to his June solstice party. It had nothing to do with meeting his old friends. No, it wasn't the rock music. Or the beer. She was around people who drank all the time and she hadn't succumbed.

"Well, what is it?"

"Nothing. I just don't...do parties."

"What about gallery openings?"

"That's business, not pleasure."

"Jules, it would mean a lot to me."

She looked stricken. "I can't do it, Wes. I...have to go to New York that week."

Sometimes she came sharply into focus for him, like a painting done with a child's primary colors, the outline inked in with a thick black pen. All summer it was the plight of the dolphins and orca whales. It was the relentless Navy teaching dolphins to defuse bombs in the harbor. Teaching them to pick up objects off the ocean floor. Forcing them to dive deeper and deeper, beyond their range. Teaching them to recognize mock-enemy frogmen underwater. Several dolphins had died of mysterious ailments.

She drove down to Connecticut to observe the protests although she swore she wouldn't take an active part. "Never mind the issue of capturing them, taking them prisoner. Just ask yourself, what right do we have to make animals fight our wars?"

"Even if it saves lives?"

"It's a moral issue, Wes."

"Promise me you won't get mixed up in this?"

It was one of the July dogdays. He had taken the afternoon off. They were lying side by side on a mangy strip of beach at the local lake. Her neat, compact body bound in two strips of cloth lay so close to his gangly freckled one and yet not touching; he could not stand the hunger he felt. "Marry me, Jules."

"You want to marry me to save me? God, Wes, what can I say? I'm not sure we're a good match. I'm not sure we're any match at all."

"We're a perfect match. And if you don't get in the water this minute and start swimming I'm going to fuck you here right in front of the good citizens of Liston."

Over the late summer while the squash prospered and a few beans began to climb the tepee he set up for her, he felt her distancing herself from him. She was inundated with visitors—sunshine patriots, she called them, but he suspected they were her fellow conspirators—

and after they left she was frequently too tired to come for supper. Even his vegetarian pizza couldn't tempt her.

At the end of August, a gallery in Soho sold her new tapestry. She called him with the news; she was bringing supper.

"Ta da!" Out of one brown bag she took four zucchini. "Home grown." Out of another, some strange-looking yellow things that she identified as chanterelles.

"You mean they're wild mushrooms? How do you know they're not poisonous?"

"Trust me."

He had to admit it was a wonderful if poisonous stir fry. "Marry me, Jules, just in case. We can die happy."

It was an ardent night. Afterwards, they slept as soundly as exhausted athletes. She tickled him awake before the sun came up and inveigled him into making love again and then she left him to get an early start on the long drive to New York City.

"You're wearing a groove in the throughway," he told her, hugging her close at the door of her car. He who had never seen Manhattan, who had only been to Boston once and chose not to go back again.

"I'll be back in a week. I'll call you."

After six days he ran up the Grimes Peak Road to check on the garden for her, although he was damned if he was going to pull any weeds. Her mailbox at the end of the long driveway was stuffed full to overflowing. He gathered up the newspapers and fliers, rifled through the letters—nothing personal, just various agency pleas for contributions—then left the stack inside her screened porch.

What was he looking for? A loveletter? Some clue as to her whereabouts?

On a hunch he shaded his eyes and peered into the living room/kitchen. It looked just as he remembered it, only much tidier. None of her papers, tools, utensils, not even a wilted floral arrangement; she was forever picking wildflowers and assembling sprawling bouquets of the commonest weeds. To Jules, goldenrod was parlor-worthy.

From this angle he couldn't see into the workroom but he knew how to get inside without picking any locks. Around back he shouldered open the bathroom window Jules had slipped through one night when she forgot and locked her key ring inside.

The studio was bare. Her loom, her spinning wheel, all the paraphernalia for her felting were gone. The wall hangings, the assorted mittens and slippers, belts and berets were gone. He couldn't take it all

in. She must have spent days packing up, patiently breaking the loom down in order to crowd it into her car. He knew before he entered the bedroom that it too would be swept clean.

There was a note on the bureau with some folded-over bills, weighted down by a key.

"Eventually you'll figure this out, dear dear Wes. I didn't have the courage to tell you face to face. My life in Liston was too lovely and a lot of its loveliness was your fault. Meanwhile, my guilt just grew and grew. I've gone back under cover so it's no use looking for me. Just know I will never forget what we had together.

your J.J.

PS. Here's \$30 for Jim Flood. Please ask him to come up and drain the system and leave the key under the 2nd brick on the R out front (that's where Mr. Chester hides it)."

It was a week before he contacted Jimbo. He couldn't face the enormity of her absence. And then, one night, making his solitary supper, moving among and talking to his dogs, he thought of Ray Waterman, the tamed, reduced Iroquois who taught music in the Liston primary school forty years ago. Every fall Ray was persuaded to open the music program with a war dance. Decked out in feathers and beads and poster paint, this grown man stomped across the stage and shook his rattles as accompaniment to a high, nasal keening that sent shivers coursing down young spines. Every boy in the class elected to study drums. The girls got penny whistles and triangles and were known as the rhythm section.

They only got to see Ray Waterman once a year in his Indian regalia. The rest of the time he stood at the blackboard in shirt and tie demonstrating half and whole notes on the treble clef.

Jules, he thought, was like that. What he had seen was the tamed Jules. The true terrorist self, J.J., had never surfaced in his presence. He could only guess at its nature.

The hardest thing for Wes was having to face the hopeful excited millings about of his dogs day after day when he drove into the yard. It was clear they had not forgotten. He wondered how long it would take to dim their expectations. As long as her scent lingered, he guessed.

Early in November he took in a soaked mongrel pup not more than three months old. Perry had found it being swept downriver. He named it Jay and let it share his bed until he could get it socialized with the others.

When hunting season opened on the second Saturday of the month, Wes was ready. He rose early, put on his orange cap and vest, loaded

his rifle and sling into the pickup, and drove out the Grimes Peak Road. The sun was just coming up as he started scaling the ledges that led to his tree stand in the glen. It was a flaming sunrise, unusual for autumn. As he climbed up over the granite outcroppings the sun's rays blurred his vision, bringing tears to his eyes, but he was back in his own skin.

The editors of **Ontario Review**

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ALICE ADAMS'

"The Islands" (OR 35) and

C. E. POVERMAN'S

"The Man Who Died" (OR 35)

are included in

Prize Stories 1993: The O. Henry Awards

MICHAEL ATKINSON'S

"The Same Troubles with Beauty

You've Always Had" (OR 36) and

LUCIA MARIA PERILLO'S

"Skin" (OR 36)

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